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BAPTISTS IN MACEDONIA:
FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE DAWN OF REGENERATION 1970
by Jovan Jonovski

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Abstract
The beginnings of the Baptist Church in Macedonia resulted from an administrative change
from Congregationalism through Methodism into Baptist in order to survive the immense
contextual pressure, rather than as a result of Baptist mission. The hostility towards the Protestant
missions in the newly formed Kingdom of Serbians, Croats and Slovenes (later renamed
Yugoslavia) after World War I made the life of the churches in the south of the Kingdom hardly
possible. Groups of believers from Skopje and Radoviš, seeking ways to survive, became Baptist
in 1928 and in 1930, respectively, as the Baptists were mentioned in the Constitution as one of the
faith groups that had equal rights. During the next forty-five years, the two churches struggled in
the especially hostile environment toward the Evangelicals in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and later
in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia).

Introduction
Missiology in the Balkans has been strongly influenced and shaped by the political and
sociological situation in the field. The initial plan of American Congregationalists to convert the
Muslims of European Turkey in the 19th century failed completely, and then was replaced with
other aims, such as converting Jews, which also failed. Another early idea to use methods of
evangelizing by an inner reformation of the Orthodox Church from within also failed. But other
unanticipated things happened, among them the great receptivity of the Armenians, rise of the
distinct Armenian Evangelical Church as well the receptivity of the Slavs (Bulgarians and
Macedonians) which further changed the missionary approach.

Rapid changes on the political map of Europe at the beginning of the 20th century brought
even bigger challenges to mission, especially in the Balkans. This brought difficulties for the local
believers. In order to survive with their new evangelical identity, two groups of Macedonian
believers, converted to Protestant Christianity through the work of the Congregational mission in
a corner of the Ottoman Empire, became Baptists, more as a modus vivendi than as a result of Baptist
missionary effort.

Beginnings of the Baptists in Macedonia
Christianity was present in Macedonia since the time of the Apostle Paul. The church in
Macedonia had strong influence in the first few centuries. But during the course of history with
many migrations, followed by wars and devastation, this changed. Particularly, during the
Ottoman Empire the knowledge of the Bible and thus the Gospel and true spirituality was very
limited. The vast majority of the priests were illiterate which contributed to the highly superficial
folkloric form of ethno-Orthodoxy, full of superstitions.

Modern evangelical mission to Macedonia started with the work of the Mission to
European Turkey by the American Board for Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM) from
1850 to 1912, subsequently renamed as the Balkan Mission. After forming a center in Samokov, Bulgaria, a theological school was formed, and its students were engaged in missionizing in Bulgaria and Macedonia. The first mission station, later church, in Macedonia started in Bansko in 1867, then in Bitola (Monastir) in 1873 and in another 10 cities and 12 villages. There were also many really small groups of believer scattered across almost the entire Macedonia.

With the creation of newly independent states in the Balkans, the movement of people and ideas across newly established borders was very difficult, which made missionary work very hard. In 1922 the Congregational mission handed its work in Macedonia, already part of the Kingdom of Serbians, Croats and Slovene over to the Methodist mission which was already working predominantly among ethnic Germans in Vojvodina, once a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The Methodist Church was not legally recognized in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and great pressure had been placed upon it, finally leading to a ban in 1925. This was especially hard in Macedonia where Methodist services were outlawed in 1926. The church in Radoviš was burned down in 1929.

The transition of Evangelical (Congregational) churches into Methodism only appeared to solve the problem of managing the mission. But it had failed to solve the problems of the local churches and scattered believers. Four preachers had been unable to serve nine churches and many groups of believers scattered over a large geographic area. On the other hand, Methodists in Vojvodina had their own problems, and failed to be of any help.

In such circumstances, seventy Congregationalists in 1924 sent a request to the Conference of Baptist Churches to send someone to Macedonia. At the first Conference of the United Baptist of Yugoslavia, held in Novi Sad, on 10-12 September 1924, a believer, Blavkić, informed the Conference of the scattered believers in Macedonia who wanted to join a community that could take care of them. The conference authorized Vinko Vacek to visit the believers in Macedonia, but that did not happen for several more years.

Vinko Vacek, Czech by nationality, who was born in Croatia, once immigrated to the United States, where he was converted. After returning from America to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, he became the most striking figure in the entire history of the Baptist Mission in Yugoslavia. He traveled and preached in all the churches in the state. By his efforts the Baptist Union in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was formed in 1924, and he was the President until 1939.

Vacek came to Skopje in June 1928 to visit Ivan Rusjakov, a former member of the Methodist Church in Skopje, explaining the Baptist beliefs to several believers. For them, Baptist beliefs mainly represented the issue of believer’s baptism, since the Methodists performed infant baptism. This meant that every adult believer needed to be “re-baptized”.

On the next visit to Skopje on Sep. 26, 1928, Vacek baptized Ivan Rusjakov, together with Sultan and his wife Atanasia Serafimova. This was the beginning of the Baptist Church in Macedonia. The group gathered in the home of Rusjakov. Vacek continued visiting Skopje. He held evangelization on 13-14 March 1929, when he met a delegation from the Methodist church from Radoviš.

The Methodist church from Radoviš was organized in 1882 and got its church building in 1889 and always was one of the most prosperous churches in the region. It was pastored by

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1. Mojzes, 49.
2. Evangeliusbote, Crvenka, nov-dec 1924, 16.
3. According Vacek’s records, Knežević.
5. The Missionary Herald, Dec. 1889, 85,12, APS Online, pg.536.
Vladimir Daskalov, who was educated in USA. Great success and growth of the church strongly irritated the authorities and the Serbian Orthodox Church, fearing that others will accept this religious and cultural identity. They orchestrated two assassination attempts on Pastor Daskalov in the summer of 1928, one by grenade and the other by setting the church building on fire. After these incidents, Daskalov left Radoviš and went to Strumica, where he remained pastor of the local Methodist church until his death.

As the Methodist Church was banned in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in order to prevent additional problems due to this new identity as Methodists, a group of former Methodists sought a way to legalize their work, by joining one of the existing and registered denominations. For this reason, a delegation was sent to Novi Sad, the center of many registered Protestant denominations, to find the appropriate denomination which would accept the Radoviš church and give it legitimacy.

The head of the delegation was Koce Nalandžijev, who often replaced Daskalov when he was absent. After visiting the Lutheran and Reformed churches, the delegation found that none of them were pietistic enough to be identified with. On the way back home, in Skopje they met with Ivan Rusjakov.

From him, they learned the basics of the beliefs and practices of the Baptist church. Vinko Vacek presented them with additional information on Baptist doctrines and the delegation decided to accept the jurisdiction of the Baptist Church if Vacek took care about the legalization of this group and would seek permission for the construction of a church building.

On 14 June, 1930, in Skopje, Vacek baptized the young Stojan and Saneta Načev from Radoviš. After their agreement with the Baptist belief, the next day Vacek visited Radoviš and there performed a baptism in a private pool of Ilija Trpkov. He baptized Koce Nalandžiev, Risto Pockov, Nikola Grozdanov, as well as Spiro Prgov and Kiril Trpkov with their wives, and an elderly man, named Nake. This constituted the formation of the Baptist church in Radoviš.

Vinko Vacek immediately went to the government authorities in Belgrade to report the new Baptist churches and asked for permission to build a church building in Radoviš. Permission for holding services was obtained immediately, while the building permit was obtained three years later, when the Radoviš church first bought an old Turkish house which was eventually adapted and reconstructed. Meanwhile, a group of thirty believers gathered in the home of Nikola Grozdanov.

After having been established, the churches in Skopje and Radoviš underwent a difficult period. Vinko Vacek continued with visits to Skopje and Radoviš, often accompanied by Ivan Rusjakov. At all times they were facing intentional intimidation by the authorities with threats to their lives. Vacek baptized Ruse and Merđana Češir and Risto Petrov, on Sep. 17, 1933, in Skopje. After that he visited the church in Radoviš in the newly opened church building when the police entered the church, interrupting the worship service and forcing Vacek out of town. Despite all

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1 This is the traditional date, the recorded material of memories of Strahil Grozdanov, states that this happened in August-September 1929, which is probably the more accurate date.
2 Strahil Grozdanov interview with Mile Imerovski.
3 According Vacek’s records, Knežević
4 Strahil Grozdanov interview with Mile Imerovski, in the records of baptisms, Vacek recorded the following names and ages (manuscripts read by Ruben Knežević): Costa Androvic (63), Spiro Prgović (35), (name illegible) Trpković (30) and (24), Nikola Grozdanović (38), Nace Micovic (70) and Risto Pasković (80).
6 Glas Jevanđela, October-November 1933, 94-95.
the threats and dangers to his life, Vacek visited Skopje and Radoviš for the last time during 16-19 June 1936, this time accompanied by Alojs Ehrlich, pastor of the church in Belgrade. After this visit, Skopje and Radoviš became a mission station of the church in Belgrade. During this visit, Vacek and Ehrlich performed baptisms in Radoviš.

The Belgrade church consisted of foreigners with the main objective to maintain the spiritual life of their members and was not oriented toward mission. As such, it was of weak support to the two churches in Macedonia. Once again, the evangelical movement in Macedonia was neglected. Under such conditions, the churches stagnated.

During the following years, Ivan Rusjakov was supported by the Foreign Mission Board [of the Southern Baptist Convention - ed.] and the church gathered in his home. Later, the church rented a room, but had problems with financing it. A brother wrote to John Alan Moore, who was the chief representative of FMB, with a request that FMB pay for half of the rent. Moore’s answer was that they already are paying a missionary worker and the church should either find smaller and cheaper space or increase the offerings.

Statistics of local Baptist church membership for the entire Yugoslavia indicate a growing trend of the Baptist movement: 70 members in 1921, 160 members in 1923 and 588 members in 1937. The first post-war statistical data is from 1948 with 1157 members, 32 of which belonged to the church in Radoviš.

Radical post-World War II changes in society took place, particularly in relation to restrictions of religious freedom and public religious life. In particular, Protestant churches, because of their connections with the West and the role of foreign missions and missionaries in their history, were labeled as suspicious foreign elements (intelligence) by the new socialist government. After the war, with reconstruction, the process of urbanization began. People started moving from the countryside to the town, and from smaller to larger cities. Many young people emigrated abroad. Under such circumstances the work of the church was very difficult, showing a tendency of numeric decline in all rural communities, but also of the church congregations in towns and small cities. Strong antireligious propaganda, especially in the school system, together with pressure on the believers, caused the younger generation to leave the church.

The church in Radoviš frequently came alive, but then hibernated, still gathering in an old rundown church building, with no preacher. Regular services began 1957 with a deaconess and the church pleaded to be visited by the brethren from the North. In two years the number of believers rose and on June 28, 1959, Ljudevit Drobnj, baptized eight people.

The number of believers in Radoviš in 1968 was 21. Finally, a new church building was built and officially opened 22 June 1969. The building had two floors; the first floor had a hall for worship with a baptismal pool below the pulpit, and on the top floor there was an apartment for a preacher that was completed just over a year later. The church had no pastor, and monitoring and correspondence with the Union of Baptist Churches of Yugoslavia (UBCY) was carried out by

13 Glas Jevandelja, July-August 1936, 71.
14 Most likely this was Ivan Rusjakov, who was responsible for working in Skopje, but Moore knew that his mail was being opened and censored, and avoided writing the name due to government hostility toward Baptist workers.
15 Written by John Alan Moore and Selma McWell, Belgrade, 7 March 1941, quoted in McConnell, 1996, 126.
16 Hopper, 1977, 126.
18 “Vesti iz Zemlje”, Glasnik saveza baptističkih crkava FNRJ, No. 4, Juli-August, Rijeka, 60.
19 Membership record for 1968.
Strahil Grozdanov in Skopje, but with no official position of an ordained preacher.

During the construction of the church buildings in Radoviš, the UBCY announced an open post for a preacher of the church in Radoviš. Marian Hlastan from Slovenia was chosen. He was appointed on December 5, 1970, also assuming responsibility for the missionary work on the entire territory of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. The first worship was attended by a large organized group that came by bus from Novi Sad.

The Skopje church, during the difficult years as we have seen with Radoviš church, was not able to grow and multiply. However, the situation in mid-50s became worse. Authorities in the 1956 banned religious gathering in homes, and since the church in Skopje had no church building, after three decades of existence, its members ceased to gather in 1955.

Strahil Grozdanov moved with his family to Skopje in 1959. Strahil is the son of Nikola, in whose house the group gathered in Radoviš, which became a Baptist church in 1930. On March 30, 1961, a new church building was opened. Strahil Grozdanov was employed by the Home Mission of UBCY. But several years later, he was removed from the payroll and had to find secular work.

This small church was stagnant. Despite the new building, the church had no regular service. Over time, there was a period when there were no services at all. The church was removed from the list of UBCY in 1965. Ivan Rusjakov died on May 20, 1968. The number of members in 1968 was 5, representing only the immediate family of Strahil Grozdanov, a number that would not change until 1974, when a more prosperous period started.

Conclusion

Evangelical work in Macedonia was always of limited capacity. Missionary workers and preachers always were pleading for more people and more resources. But somehow the work was kept up at the surviving minimum. This also applies to the Congregational, namely Methodist mission. Baptist work lacked people and resource in ministry. During the more recent period, with just a few more dedicated servants, it showed that so much more could have been achieved if only the mission work in Macedonia was of higher priority.

With the work of the first fulltime minister, Marijan Hlastan in 1970 and during the following 30 years with the work of Strahil Grozdanov, Ivan Grozdanov and Bore Blazevski in Skopje and Cedo Ralević in Radoviš as well as others, there are two more churches in Murtino and Bansko, and the number of members tripled.

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23 McConnell 1996, 146.
26 Membership record for 1968.
27 Membership record for 1974.
Carolina, 1996.
*The Missionary Herald*, Containing the Proceedings of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions.